

A literary-philosophical book in the tradition of Nietzsche.

Notes of an Underground Humanist

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Chris Wright

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On controversy.— No being will fly whose feathers have not been ruffled.

Introduction

I remember a time (seems like decades ago) when I still was sort of sanguine. I wanted to write a book that would serve as a wake-up call to the world, a book that would lay bare the absurdities and hypocrisies of our civilization. Sort of in the manner of Nietzsche. Writing it was a delight. All the invective, the glib reflections on human stupidity and conformism, the epigrams on religion and politics and women. Periodically I wrote substantive analyses of society and psychology, delved into philosophy and history, even literature. On the surface the book was a sprawling mess, but in its essence it was to be a “dialectically articulated artistic whole.” Basically I was striving for greatness. I wanted to catapult myself into history by resurrecting the spirit of Marx and Nietzsche. These pusillanimous times, I told myself, demanded nothing less.

You see, for a while—when I was still very young—I was preoccupied with the thought of my genius. Or lack of it. I wasn’t sure that life was worth living unless I could achieve genius. Mediocrity was the morass I was constantly clawing out of. I *had* to have potential, I just *had* to. I *did* have potential, in fact—I *was* the next [*insert famous name here*]*—no, no, I wasn’t, I was just a hack, a talentless impostor—and yet, I was obviously so different from everyone!—surely I had the potential to become a genius, at least in the public eye (for I knew even then on some level that the idea of “genius” or “greatness” is dishonest and empty)—*etc. I was neurotic, riddled with doubts and ambitions and self-contradictions, self-conscious to the point of doubting my self-consciousness. I saw myself as postmodernity personified, both in my personality and my beliefs. To quote my former self:

My life consists of intellectual levitation. I have absorbed the trends of my culture and hover between conflicting worldviews. I recognize the truth in every philosophy from Marxism to psychoanalysis, from Hegelianism to poststructuralism; I recognize the value of every ethical position from Christian morality to nihilism; I have sympathies for every political ideal

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from Chomsky's anarchism to Schumpeter's democratic elitism. I cheer the march of science even as I fear it. I support globalization even as it horrifies me. I am a mess of contradictions.

My faith in the power of reason is totally anachronistic, and even contradictory with myself. I am the bastard child of a union between the Enlightenment and Existentialism—the Masculine and the Feminine.

If I start analyzing myself, though, I'll never stop, so let's just say I had a deep need to be affirmed by myself and others, and I overcompensated for a lack of recognition by creating in my own mind a potential myth of myself. I knew I was overcompensating even as I did it, and I knew how ridiculous my self-absorption was, but, perversely, I interpreted this knowledge as confirming the truth of my delusions: if my self-awareness was so keen as to see through itself—to diagnose itself—well then, I must indeed be pretty special! I must have some remarkable intuitive abilities! And so the very knowledge that I cherished self-delusions saved me from having to acknowledge their delusional character. I was deluded, but I wasn't.

Anyway, even back then—even at the age of 19—I recognized the absurdity, the contingency, of life. Nothing was real, everything was to be doubted (even the injunction to doubt everything), everything was paradoxical, life was wonder. So I didn't take this stuff too seriously—although, of course, on another level I did. But the point I'm making is that despite all my torments I remained enough of an idealist to think I could have an impact on society by writing a book.

Luckily I came to my senses. Books are not dead, not yet, but their history seems to have passed its zenith. There are more books now than ever before, but as their numbers increase their influence declines. They become less relevant, less respected. Less culturally central. Their place is taken by computers, the internet, television, magazines, video games, which, unlike books, serve to atomize people and attenuate culture itself. American culture is defined more and more by the negation of culture, namely interpersonal fragmentation, immediate gratification, the fetishizing of technology, bureaucratic

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routinization, universal commodification. Broadly speaking, in short, social life is too atomistic, too materialistic for anything esoteric to really matter.

You disagree? Look at the state of contemporary literature. V. S. Naipaul, surely an authority on the subject, has said that the novel is dead. (T. S. Eliot even said that it had ended with Flaubert and James.) Fiction can no longer be called culturally relevant. The first thing to go was the art of narration, of telling *stories*, in the manner of Balzac, Dickens, Hugo, and so on. Modernism and postmodernism abandoned it as hopelessly old-fashioned, since it seemed to presuppose that life is comprehensible—even *simple*, “*linear*”—that there is such a thing as truth and authentic selfhood. “There is something inauthentic for our time,” wrote Lionel Trilling in 1969, “about being held spellbound, momentarily forgetful of oneself, concerned with the fate of a person [namely, the main character of the narrative] who is not oneself but who also, by reason of the spell that is being cast, is oneself, his conduct and his destiny bearing upon the reader’s own. By what right, we are now inclined to ask, does the narrator exercise authority over that other person, let alone over the reader: by what right does he arrange the confusion between the two and presume to have counsel to give?”¹ In retrospect, the modern contempt for narrative necessarily prefigured a contempt for fiction, given that the essence of fiction throughout most of history has been narrative. Ergo: fiction itself has come to seem inauthentic and somehow frivolous.

Poetry is in the same position. It’s everywhere, like fiction, but there is a macrocosmic sense of “*Who cares anymore?*”

Or look at the state of theory. Philosophy, psychology, sociology, economics. Far from being original or ambitious, they often are not even readable anymore! Philosophy has deteriorated into “research,” in the process becoming so technical and tedious that it’s a terrible bore to read. (I should know: I have a Master’s in Philosophy.) In some ways I love academia, but I fear it has become an incestuous

¹ Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 135. I cannot refrain from saying that this little book is remarkable. It is lucid, a pleasure to read, yet challenging—thought-provoking as few books are.

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and largely irrelevant little community. If from one perspective academia appears comical or superfluous, somewhat like the rotten limbs of a leper waiting to fall off his body, it isn't the fault of academics: it's because contemporary society has little use for esoteric pursuits.

In a moment of sadness once I wrote this:

I can't imagine that the overripeness of our culture doesn't make every esoteric project otiose. I can't fathom the relevance anymore of art and intellectual matters. Philosophy, let us admit, is in its yellow leaf; this is uncontroversial, though painful for me, given that philosophy is, was, or would have been my vocation. Psychology and the social sciences don't fare much better, given the imperative of specialization as well as the public's apathy. Literature is passing away, losing its powers to engage society's imagination and tap the vein of rebellion—or (at any rate) discontent. Music died decades ago. Even political activism founders on the rock of the System. My floundering, my depression, itself seems merely comical and narcissistic. When everything is pointless and society has reached the end of time, and whatever one does will not matter in the long run, is it not presumptuous to ascribe *weight* to oneself? Truly, I might as well follow Byron's example and give myself up to masochistic hedonism.

For those of us who keep pace with the march of history, the illusion of immortality or "existential meaning" has dissipated, whether temporarily or permanently. Perhaps the situation will change in the coming decades or centuries as social structures continue to evolve; but as of now, the anguished Existentialist way of thinking remains timely.

In light of all this, why have I written this book? If I no longer have any illusions about the power of writing in generating social change, what's the point? Well, actually, I didn't have to do much extra writing for this project: I simply culled my journal for "maxims and

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reflections” (in Goethe’s phrase) and arranged them as a book. The product could easily have run to 600 pages, or 900; maybe I’ll use the leftovers in future books. As for my motivation: like many people, I’m somewhat bored. Tired of endless reading, endless thinking, endless journal-writing; I’m 27 and I want my fifteen minutes of fame. It would distract me, at least, from “existential nausea” (to quote Sartre). We all want recognition, and some of us chase it through writing.

I was about to say that this book is my answer to Pascal’s *Pensées* and Nietzsche’s works, but that wouldn’t be quite right: it isn’t intended to break new philosophical ground. Originally I wanted to include substantive analyses of the self and society, but that would have become academic in tone. Nevertheless, I have included a semi-academic paper I wrote on John Brown because it ties into the themes that have guided me in this endeavor, namely the apparent demise of “humanism,” the inhumanity of the modern world and the self’s struggle to persevere, and so forth. I wanted to celebrate the individual. The unphilosophical nature of the project is how I justify the many “self-contradictions” scattered throughout the book, the changes in tone, in emphasis, in ideas. The reader should keep in mind, moreover, that, being taken from an intellectual journal, it’s all experimental and hypothetical. (The hypothetical in question is, “*If I took myself seriously...*”) Parts of it may offend, parts of it may shock, but as long as it stimulates, I’m content.

Part Two of the book differs from Part One: it consists of a short story and, secondly, of a satire on modernity written in the form of the Book of Job.

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